

FIELD



FIELD

CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND POETICS
NUMBER 14 — SPRING 1976

PUBLISHED BY OBERLIN COLLEGE
OBERLIN, OHIO

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FIELD gratefully acknowledges support from the Ohio Arts Council and from the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines.

Published twice yearly by Oberlin College.

Subscriptions: \$4.00 a year / \$7.00 for two years / Single issues \$2.00 postpaid.

Subscription orders and manuscripts should be sent to: *FIELD*, Rice Hall, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio 44074. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

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THE FORGIVENESS DREAM:
MAN FROM THE WARSAW GHETTO

He looked about six or seven, only much too thin.
It seemed right he would be there, but everything,
every lineation, was slow. . . . He was speaking in Polish,
I couldn't answer him.
He pointed at the window, the trees, or the snow,
or our silver auditorium.

I said to him in English, "I've lived the whole time
here, in peace. A private life." "In shame,"
I said. He nodded. He was old now, kind,
my age, or my mother's age: he nodded,
and wrote in my notebook — "Let it be good."

He frowned, and stopped,
as if he'd forgotten something,
and wrote again,
"Let it."

I walk, and stop, and walk —
touch the birchbark shining, powdery, cold:
taste the snow, hot on my tongue —
pure cold, licked from the salt of my hand:
This quiet, these still unvisitable stars
move with choices.
Our kin are here.
Were here.

FOUR POEMS ABOUT THE BLANK PAGE

1. *By the River*

The old woman was scrubbing
the moon again.
How could you keep it clean?
It kept getting near the earth,
and shadows dirtied it
like a piece of bread
at a picnic
that the ants swarm over.

2. *After a Heavy Snowfall*

On a familiar street, the blind man
probed the snow with his cane,
unable to find the curb.

3. *On the Ice Floe*

What is the last thing the seal
sees as it rises to the surface
at its breathing hole?
A mound of snow? No,

it is the polar bear,
crouched, holding one white
paw across its face
to hide its black nose.

4. *The Kiss*

My fingers give each thing
they touch a delicate,
oily kiss.

I carry a white cloth
with me, to wipe
away its traces.

There won't be any evidence
against me when I'm dead.

FEEDING THE CAGED OWL

Cage wires white like ribs
in the flashlight's glare.
Inside, the heart lives on,
dark and feathered.

Feeding it; the lingering,
velvety feel of mouse fur
on my fingertips.

It survives. It swallows
small things whole
and spits up what it can't digest,
pellets of fur and bone.

THE PIANO

And when I surrender to the heat,
The blue evening heat . . .

Someone's hand will reach for a
basket,
Wanting to pull it in, and, yet,
not daring!
—Alexandr Blok. June, 1909.

1.

The first sentence is like pain if it remembers
The humid spangled pears of the summerhouse
At Shakhmatovo, or the dream you have in which

You dance with the Czar's youngest daughter:

She's dressed in a *mikado*-yellow shirt,
There's a long strand of hair in her mouth, and
As you dance, the steps you take together

Are suggested by the bullets that are just now

Tearing at her mouth and shoulder. And then it's
All repeated as she moves along a wall just behind
Her collapsed mother and father. She's shot, again,

And through the mouth and shoulder.

As you repeat these few movements your partner's
Eyes change to the white of egg-shells. The Czar
Was put in a plain cane-chair. There are still

The dusty country roads at Shakhmatovo.

Your first wife had heavy red hair, and as you
Dream the Duma sits like a crowd on the stairs:
At the center of the ballroom there are birches

Almost doubled over with wind. There's a white piano.

At night, St. Petersburg is empty, its lots vacant
Except for the purple iron fences standing
In blowing snow. You can only remember the folding

Canvas chair that looks out over

The choppy water just below Odessa. It's always
The same movements: she steps backwards, goes
Rigid, she shakes her head just once, and then

Slumps forward. There's blood on a *mikado*-yellow blouse.

There's blood in the horse-troughs of St. Petersburg.
And on the snow.
There's blood on the ivory keys of the piano.

She had heavy red hair and bluish elbows.

Blok, the streets of the city still run
With the iron trams, and baskets of lungwort
Are thrown for warmth over children who

Are sleeping in the open deserted buildings.

Once, when you were very young you watched peasants
Shoot a horse in a pasture: it fell over
Like a table. And what I've kept from you, Alexandr,

Is that you were cruel and handsome!

2.

For Pulaski

You said that it only remains for us to fall asleep,
Or to break the window, how putting our heads out,
We could see life as being simple. Alright, then look

Down beneath you in the street: all other worlds

Repeat your simple life like down below you the deep,
Indigo footprints in the snow. You sit and remember
Actresses with their long legs descending

An iron, spiral stairwell to their dressing-rooms

Where you flirted with them: empty bottles on a piano,
And roses bobbing in icewater. The mirrors are low.
You remember Lyubov': here in a dark room, each month

When she was bleeding her breath was scented as Petrograd is

This winter evening; her breasts grew big and sore.
You remember her, now, here in this dark room? Old; you sit
Like the servant who's unbuttoned his collar, who sits

Between two candles in the shadows, and picks

The last meat from the bones of a duck, or from
A dozen half-eaten milk-doves.
The large vase in the corner of the room is cracked.

I'm sorry, Alexandr, if you lack things.

I'm sorry for the poem is only important like a shoe!
Perhaps,
More like a pair of shoes. Or, say,

Like a blue, Etruscan slipper

Made of skins from the stomach of deer who were fed
Sweet-grasses and cress, and who were groomed
By virgins once each morning during an early spring.

A blue, Etruscan slipper like the frozen foot of the child

Sleeping below your window. His deep, indigo footprints.
This winter other lives repeat your complicated life.
His foot, you'd say, is elemental and real. You'd tell Lyubov'

It looked like a black, butchered seal;

With her child gone to the charnel-barn in Petersburg
She doesn't even hear you.
You are aware of her absence?

Her death came in the middle of a winter brook.

The child below your window has found
A large dry book. He'll burn it as fuel.
The blue smoke will reach your window. And, Alexandr,

You're forty: your teeth chatter as you run to look!

3.

The band falls silent. Behind you the beach
Goes gradually up to the road. You can see
In the seaweed some silver pepper-dulse tumble

Back as a big wave smooths out in front of you.

In Italy you dreamed you walked
Through fields of wheat and frankincense until
You came to a forest where women were waiting

With an old cow. *Alexandr, the band falls silent.*

There is the sound of water gurgling underground, and, once,
With Lyubov', at Shakhmatovo, you sat
In the dark parlor during a thunderstorm:

She bit into your shoulder and you slapped her face with

Some sheet music. You both laughed about it.
Walking outside afterwards she said
The air smelled clean like a German train.

She was pregnant, then, and wore a white scarf.

You both laughed, and there was blood at the side
Of her mouth and on your father's sheet music
Which was old and yellowed. *The band falls silent;*

And you are standing in an empty street in Rome

Screaming for a nasturtium with breasts. You were
Arrested that night,
And Lyubov' is dead, and Reghitza is a long ways off!

The band became silent because you walked past them

With a tablecloth over your head, and just the one table
Falling over, you said, like a dead horse.
The horse was shot beside the ear, the ear fell off:

The horse spurting in the white saxifrage and tall grass.

The peasants walk off laughing. The head of the dead
Horse rested in a pool of blood. It looked like an anvil.
That night for supper there was

A thick, smoky roast on a platter surrounded by dark berries.

And, of course, you vomited.
The cook held your head
And then later she sang to you a lullaby in which

A young prince dies of a rose catarrh. It's not

A sad song. She nudged you a little and you frowned.
One night when you were just thirty
You stuck a revolver into your mouth. The night

Outside, you thought, was cold and ablative. A bird, then,

Flew into your room and the cat attacking it spilled
The vase in the corner.

Once, again, you laughed and grew older. It's always

The same like looking down a dark well in Spoleto:

You shouted your name and two boys ran out of the shadows.
The almond trees in wooden boxes are carried into
The streets, here, each Christmas. You chased the boys

Into an alley, still you are shouting your name.

It's like looking down into a well in Spoleto.

A band falls silent.

Or just a book flying through a window. The boy

Down below will burn it for fuel.

One night you beat Lyubov' to a pulp. Your shepherds
Have grey hair.

Gazing down into a dark well, at night, you felt

Something slip away. I think

You chased it into the alley. Calling out to it
You refused
To remember any of this by the morning

Which is Christmas Day. The almond trees *are* fragrant.

And, Alexandr, they said you hated the world in a new way.
After your mother and father divorced, he began
To write to you his dry, minatory letters.

Your mother once promised to hang herself with barbed wire.

And so something slid away while you shouted
Down into the dark well in Spoleto. It was
Like a sleigh with two horses pulling

Out of the gate to your grandfather's house

Outside Moscow. Try to understand! You lived
On the edge of a city: its people, now, file
Past your grave: they raise their collars, they drop flowers,

And they say your poems aloud with tenderness: the way,
drunk,
You would say the list of names of women you had shamed.

UNSPEAKABLE

The way I die is strange . . . It's not life
that kills me, not death, not love.
I die of a thought that's silent, like a wound.
Haven't you felt the pain

of a huge thought? One rooted like a plant
in your life, that gobbles soul and meat
but will not flower.
Haven't you carried, inside you,
a sleeping star
that consumes you but will not shine?

This is martyrdom! To carry
forever a barren and tragic seed
nailed, like a tooth, in your organs.

But what if you yank it out one day and find
an inviolate flower
that will never die . . .
It couldn't be more wonderful
to hold God's head in your hands.

translated by Martha Moody

FAIRFIELD

"A guy I used to know —
he taught me all about the sky."
—Humphrey Bogart in *High Sierra*

I wanted it depressed, one dusty road
and two cafes both with 'help wanted' signs.
Where I ate, the waitress was too in love
with the cook for things I wanted to say.
The canal passed through town ripe green
and grain, I had to admit, grew assured.
A dog slept fat on warm gravel. No trouble foreseen
raising funds to build the new gym.

I'd expected hurt, the small town kind everyone
knows and ignores, a boy who tried and tried
to leave home, sobbing his failure alone
at the mirror back of the bar, still wearing
his '39 letter sweater, still claiming
the girl who moved to Great Falls will return.
I wanted to honor him in this poem,
to have the sky turn dark as I drove off,
the town in my rear view mirror
huddled with fear white in black air.

The drunk I saw seemed happy. I drove empty away.
What if Fairfield sent signals to Mars
and signals came back saying all weather is yours
no matter how vulgar? I imagined cruel sky
left every bird orphan. When I passed
Freeze Out Lake I saw herons accepted that refuge
as home, and I knew the water was green with sky,
not poisoned green with resolve.

NORWAY

Fishbone ground for cleaning, flagstone
halls, girls who wear gray dresses
scrub them blind. It takes a lot of friction,
smoothing stones, your knees grow scales.
When I come back the girls are gone,
my bed is straight and smells of fish.

This is where she used to work and this
is where she's buried.

Stone and water stint a farm, grudge
foothold. One white horse,
reluctant pasture. Go high enough
the rocks aren't even good for hiding.
Tunnels can't be dug and so they're
built, some wooden slats to help
with all that snow and sky.

And this is what she looked like,
this is how we knew you right away.

Whalemeat has more blood
than anything that grows on land.
Three days without rain in Bergen
this year, hands hung, mouths hung.
The people get in boats one night
each June and watch the sun
dip down, dip up again. That's festival,
the rest is oilcloth, heavy nets.
In boots like these you only step
on purpose; winters, no one talks.

And this is where you'll sleep, we
haven't used the pillows since she left.

Cloudberryes kjenner du? the children
pick them, bowls filled up and spilling over.
I've a chair to learn a language in,
the chair's too soft, my memory's wrong,
I rock instead. Outside the grammar's strict,
the square is all right angles, steps,
A fountain blows the pavement wet.
a tall man crosses on his way to class,
he has no family, walks
a line as dazzling as Pythagoras.

And this, you may not want to wear it,
is for you to keep.

RYOANJI

Smoke signals for friends,
a favorable day, windless,
from the northeast slope
I get a white answer.
I add pinetrees.

And now wall after wall
with theories of language,
wall after wall
my sadness coughs through gold teeth,
rain and wooden sandals
on the wooden corridors
dead ends everywhere, I find,
anxiously, in darkness,
my toes ponder
the darkness,
I'm sorry for myself,
I disagree with my toes
disagree with my sadness,
I miss the smoke signals,
old, black, and partial to me.
Now they don't come any more,
now it's night,
now the fire comes,
best of all and
worst of all.
I don't much like fire,
I don't much like smoke
and the same goes for breath.
I like coughing, sort of,
or spitting,
or the dark thoughts of illness,
of darkness.
Even cameras seem strange to me

and pinetrees in flowerpots.
I understand khaki fruit better
and howling Old Japanese
and the bowing at the end of the escalator
and raw fish.

And a lot of sounds with "und,"
and all of them
treacherously heartbreaking,
I welcome you, heart,
welcome you, things that do the breaking,
maybe there will be
paper boats on the Kamo,
made of folded petitions,
that would be
entrusted to the pool
— so often sung about
so lacking in in-
fluence —
where they anchor and wait
for the sinking of the petitioners
and closing remarks.

In the evening
the fever in the infirmary beds goes up,
you learn some things there,
the evidence for some things
isn't valid,
withered leaves rustle
in the wastepaperbasket,
the hedgehogs under the bushes,
almost silent,
live within easy access
to the prickly hide of my insights,
we rub them together
but only the moss moves,
not the world.

We exchange addresses,
we exchange
our personal pronouns,
we have so much in common,
sunrises,
the future till nineteen hundred and seven.
Then we'll practice breathing,
together,
from the instructions of Cheyne
and the instructions of Stokes,
that will pass the time nicely
with the snoring accompaniment
of our inmost thoughts.

If someone wants to
he can hang photos in the showcases,
tell anecdotes
or listen to them,
discuss the situation,
ornithology, penmanship,
above all Good Night.
A determined clan, we hold out
with our hedgehogs
at the critical moment,
and don't turn back
where what's happened is piling itself
in baskets, sacks, barrels,
a storehouse, open to everyone,
doors bang, footsteps echo,
we don't hear, we're deaf too,
our region is in free fall.
Bushes, darknesses, and infirmary beds,
we won't colonize anymore,
we'll teach our daughters and sons the hedgehog words
and stick to disorder,
our friends bungling at the world.

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

1

Remembering the dead man

I observed
that remembering is a form of forgetting.

It said:
rescue the flames from the ashes,
pursue Geology in the discarded
sediment of the instant,
restore the time sequence
from the insoluble chemistry.

It said:
separate the critique of birdflight
from the morning shopping
and the expectation of love.
Proceed to where
the parallels cross.
Fulfill the demands of logic
by means of dreams.
Take the fossils from their cases,
thaw them with the warmth of your blood.
Seek the sign
instead of the metaphor
and thereby the only place
where you are, always.
I move along
in order to translate anthills,
to taste tea with a closed mouth,
to slice tomatoes
under the salt of the verses.

Invite him over

The shame, that the survivor is right,
exempt from trial
and with the arrogance of judgment!

Who denies
that green things are green?
That lends our word
a lovely security,
the significance of a solid base.
But the stylizing
that the heart
imposes on itself
keeps its motives
like the ammonite
the dead man looks at.
It wants to extend feelers,
turn vine-leaves into fernspirals,
bring errors into blossom,
hear autumn as a whiff of snow.

But don't forget the houses
in which you live among us.
The lounge chair in the garden
will suit you
or the view of trees through the window
that makes you prop
your elbows on your knees.
Come in out of the rain, and speak!

3

Converse with him

Here it began and it didn't begin,
here it continues
in a noise from the next room,
in the click of the switch,
in shoes taken off behind the door.
The pallor of your face
that blots out colors
isn't valid now.
Sentences come from habits
that we scarcely noticed.
The way the necktie's tied
is a momentous objection,
the ability to fall asleep quickly
a proof against subjective interpretations,
the preference for tea
classifies the existence of animals.

4

Find his theme

Interchangeable:
the knocking at the door
which began the conversation
and the waving
as the streetcar clanged,
the name on the grave cross
and the name on the garden gate,
children grown up
and postcard greetings from Ragusa.

Words as pulsations of air,
the organ note from the bellows,

the decision
to hear the song
or to be the song —
warped uprights
to the fall line of phosphorus,
when the theme begins.
No variations accepted
not the excuses of power
and the reassurances of truth,
use cunning
to track down the questions
behind the answer's broad back.

5

Reading his book and his death

Figures settled in
at the shut-down mines of Zinnwald
behind the demon frenzy
of Mittelgebirge and season,
while the foreground
is occupied by ruffians
who divided our hours among themselves.

Pirna in balance with the Pyramids,
the freedom of express trains
cashed in small change by block leaders,
the family ethically founded,
contempt for nomads and loners.

But the objections
come back to the sentences
like eager adjectives,
a line of termites
that hollows them out
to a thin skin
of black letters.

The Style is Death,
the shot in the stomach,
white rose in a morphine dream,
jokes to amuse life,
salvos into a snowstorm.

6

Winning confidence from his life

While you share the thoughts,
direct the conversation by your death,
writing along on poems,
gathering pears
and viewing new landscapes
(but I finally
resisted garden work)
meanwhile
Simona stiffened
into a figure of stone,
her fabricated warmth
under the cold of tears.
She waits for the moss,
the injuries of rain,
vine shoots and birdshit.
She'll decay to be warmed
to a life that we want to share,
patience!

translated by David Young

FROM THE ZODIAC

1. *Cancer*

catches the screen door
on her knee, cotton dress

streaked with sweat
boots the chickens off the porch
clumps out into the yard

rain sliding down her face
like glycerine

no wonder she lives alone

& when she lets the bucket
jerk down on its rope & break
the black water at the bottom

you are that bucket
& I am that water

2. *Virgo*

smooths the blankets with
her hands & listens for the slide
of one sheet over the other

evenings her father slips
her nightgown over her head
& when she dreams she dreams

she is that moth flipping past
catching the window's light
she never wakes in the night

3. *Libra*

drags her weight up the stairs
arms full of packages

unlocks the right door locks
it behind her takes off the
hairnet the red galoshes

then she opens all the boxes
lays out everything
she wants it to come out right

stands there all afternoon
in the kitchen in
her tiny shoes going

one for you
& one for me

4. *Scorpio*

give her your hand, your life story
take this for an answer

these whorls here:
your ancestors arriving
on the noon express

the love line feathering
a park bench a beach cabana
pickle treacle hackle nipple

sweat beading in the palm
a straw hat drifting
on the lake's green glass

and this dip in the fate line
you go out to tend the cucumbers
in the dark of the moon
the door clicks behind you
telephone telephone telephone

THE GOLDEN AGE

Rivers ran uphill,
following wherever we went;
they whispered *Ask us anything*
anything at all

Only the idiot-king listened,
out of politeness.

Everyone was happy, but bore it well.
We moved to the desert
to make farming more difficult.
No use: everything
rhymed with orange.

The children smiled and smiled.
Alchemists dreamed of lead.
The most beautiful woman of the Age
looked like her sister.

And when it was over,
the king declared a moment of silence
that could not pass.

A FACE TO BE HIT

Oh how the bones are thin in rainy weather
when the nurseries of Greek noses
resound with the shrill squeal of red eggs
which sometime cry beefsteak tears
perfumed like a beast of burden
when the apples seek redress
and when the spectacles pop out the eyes of the ministers
of the third republic
where the princes hide like chipped pots
in the recesses of the cupboards
with the new born bastards of the servant girl
who doesn't want to be turned out

Oh how the bones are fat
when the Chinese lanterns of felt
yawn like beans
when their bellybuttons have their beards
and hair trimmed
at the neighborhood shearer
who has never seen such poodles
trained so well to pocket sugar
like blind men on the corner of a quai
bicycle riders in a cemetery
or musicians in the gutter

HALF WAY

The old dog and the ataxic flea
met on the tomb of the unknown soldier
The old dog stunk of the dead officer
and the flea was saying
Isn't this unfortunate to pin these little turds
with the red ribbons of honor on his chest
Once upon a time the rotten leeks didn't blush at being rotten
the wheezing and sputtering kindling
made very respectable hearses
with a poisonous smell of church mushrooms
and the moustache was only used to sweep up
Now the fountains of old hairs gush between the cobblestones
and you worship them old general
because they come from the skull of a priest
who doesn't have any bones
who doesn't have any eyes
and who watches himself dissolve in the holy water basin

TILL TOMORROW

Let the buckwheat die if the sparrow's teeth
don't entice the larks
if the light from white wine doesn't cloud the antique mirrors
if the shoestrings don't lead the butterflies
the evening
when the rain falls like a hanged man
whose rope snaps
because the neighbor was fighting with his wife
since the clock persists in laughing before striking
to show its owners the world is turned upside down
that the fountains will hunt men tomorrow
climbing over flies over bedbugs or over microbes
of pretty microbes in the shape of barometers
and which will squeak squeak at each step
with their shoes worn through by their children
It won't be warmer or cooler
but it will rain bread crumbs
with which you'll rub your buttocks
as the rabbits rub themselves on the Citroëns
from which such good broth is made
for the priests and generals
who will flow tomorrow
forgotten in a drawer with some offerings
killers of rats
and some little brooms which will scream
Give us the poisoned generals
Give us the smell of the ministers
that the dogs sniff out at the street corner
But this doesn't resolve the problem
of direct communication from place Blanche
to rue Trousse-Nonains
It will only be cleared up when the string beans
leaving their stalks angrily
give themselves up to the saucepan

which awaits them with a smile
rubbing its hands with the ash of a pipe
that once belonged to Plato or Archimedes
Between now and then we shall see a great number of
 wooden shoes
smash the rotten old skull of the unknown soldier
and say to him
You smell like a goat hey crab louse

POST NO BILLS

Never more will the bones of the wind startle the old clocks
 yawning in the sardine tins
Never more will the table legs take to their heels
to mimic the flies
Never more will the broken teeth sing
Never more will the round loaves of bread walk naked
Never more will the breezes tidy the salt statues
Never more will the handrail be a railway signal
Never more will the shaved moustache grow under my
 neighbor's eye
Never more will the beefsteak whistle for its dog
Never more will the electricity of my tail prevent the lightning
 from striking
Never more will the metro beg for a drink
Never more will the cherry pits fly from the urinals
because the smallest speck of dust the flea who searches for
 ears forgotten in taxis
the hard-boiled eggs who know how to spy so well through
 keyholes
and what remains of the wall of China
are there to look after the traditions
and make everyone respect the first strawberries
who look at themselves in all the mirrors
and would be so happy to see a calf hanging from his stall
throw himself on the butcher
and run after his skin so worn out
he would see his brother through it

translated by Keith Hollaman

TROIS MORCEAUX SUR LA FORME D'UNE POIRE
(titled after Satie)

I.

Three pears ripen
on the ledge. Weeks pass.
They are a marriage.

The middle one's a conversation
the other two are having.
He is their condition.

Three wings without birds,
three feelings.
How can they help themselves?

They can't.
How can they stay like that?
They can.

II.

The pears are consulting.
Business is bad this year,

d'Anjou, Bartlett.
They are psychiatrists,

patient and slick.
Hunger reaches the hard stem.

It will get rid of them.

III.

The pears are old women;
they are the same.

Slight rouge,
green braille dresses,
they blush in unison.

They will stay young.

They will not ripen.

In the new world,
ripeness is nothing.

MILENA

"In the end it is always the woman
who judges . . ."

Kafka, *Letters to Milena*

He told me to lie down
in the garden. I knew
he was jealous
of the flowers in my room,
and I was only to say
yes, being the sanctified
who sent him "feuilletons,"
letters which annoyed him.
That time in the forest
when he forgot himself,
I saw that in my heart
there was a piece of wood
in which the grain
had vanished. He told me
paper burns our eyes out.
Still, I knew he would write,
because it seemed
when he looked back at me
on the platform
there was the sunlight
burning itself,
there was my mouth
still forming the one
poor word which he loved,
"nevertheless."

COLD SUMMER

The team of four horses in front of the Bolshoi Theater . . . The heavy Doric columns . . . The Square of the Opera — an asphalt lake, with thatched flashes of trolleys — swollen even at three in the morning with the clatter of humble city horses . . .

I know you, Grand Opera Square — the navel of European cities — and of Moscow — neither better nor worse than your sisters.

I walk out from the dusty oasis of the Metropole — a world hotel — where I have wandered in under the glass marquee through the corridors, streets of an internal city — stopping now and then in front of the ambushes of mirrors, or resting on the quiet inner lawn with its wicker chairs and bamboo benches — out onto the Square, swallowing sunlight like a blind man: the majestic fact of the Revolution stabs me in the eyes; the huge aria for a strong voice drowns the car horns.

The young peddlers selling courage stand on the Petrovka across from the Mur-Maryliza, rooted to the wall, an entire brood of them, tray to tray. This little vanguard of salesgirls — only a flock of birds. A sparrow-like, snub-nosed army of Moscow girls, of sweet working typists, flower-girls, little bare-legged ones, — living on crumbs and blooming in the summer . . .

In a downpour, they take off their shoes and run across the yellow streams, through the reddish clay of eroded avenues, holding their precious shoes tightly — without them they would die: it's a cold summer. It is as if a bag of ice, which is simply impossible to melt completely, were hidden in the deep green of the Neskuchnovo, its chill crawling through all of web-footed Moscow . . .

I remember a line of Barba's: "When the painful heat has burned through the huge rocks." In the days when freedom flourished — "That crude tart, the darling of the

Bastille" — Paris raged in the heat — but for us it's Moscow, grey-eyed and snub-nosed, with its summer chills in July . . .

And yet I love to run through the garden in the morning, out onto the bright rain-washed streets, where drifts of summer snow have piled up during the night, featherbeds of soft dandelions, — straight to the newsstand for *Pravda*.

I love to kick an empty tin can like a little boy, or ride behind the kerosene stove, not to a store, but into the slums: slums are worth telling about: the gate-way, then to the left the rough, almost monastic staircase, the two open terraces; hollow footsteps, ceilings that press down, the flagstones overturned; the doors jammed with thick felt; tangles of rope and twine; cunning, underfed children in long shirts rush around your legs; it's a real Italian courtyard. But in one of the little windows behind a heap of trash you can always see a Greek woman, one of those faces of indescribable beauty for which Gogol' made ringing, magnificent similes.

You don't love the city if you don't appreciate its rags, its humble, miserable sections; if you haven't panted on the staircases, gotten tangled in tin cans, in the cats' miaowing; haven't stared in wonder at the prison courtyard of Vhutemas, at the quarrelsome guard in blue, at the live, animal charm of the airplanes . . .

You don't love the city if you don't know its petty habits: for example, a cab never climbs the hump of the Kamerger-skovo without a horse ahead and the beggars and flower-girls following behind . . .

At the trolley rest-stop, on Arbat — the beggars rush at the motionless coaches and collect their tribute — but if it's empty they don't budge, they sun themselves like animals under the awning of the bathrooms; and I have seen how the blind ones play with their guides.

But the flower-sellers walk off to one side and spit on their roses.

In the evening the crowds begin to play and stroll in the thick green along Tverskij Boulevard — all the way from

the Pushkin Monument to the Timiryasev field. But within these green gates of Moscow so many surprises are hidden!

Past the perpetual bottles on the lottery tables, past the three blind men who are singing "Talisman" together, to the dark heaps of people all crowding under one tree . . .

On that tree a man is sitting, lifting a straw bag with one hand, desperately pounding on the trunk with the other. Something is struggling around in the tree top. And it's bees! A whole swarm has flown from somewhere, with the queen bee, and landed on the tree. The stubborn swarm hangs onto a branch like a brown sponge, but this strange beekeeper from the Boulevard shakes and shakes the tree and holds his straw bag up to the bees.

During a thunderstorm it's good to sit in Trolley A, tearing through the green waist-band of Moscow, running after the storm clouds. The city is expanding near the Church of the Saviour with stepped chalky terraces; the river and the chalky mountains are digging into the city. Here the heart of the city pumps a bellows. And all Moscow writes with chalk. More and more white bones of houses are sticking clear out. Against the leaden slabs of the thunderstorm you see first the Kremlin, white bird boxes, and last the insane stone card game of the Educational House, an intoxication of plaster and windows, regular as honeycombs, piles of shapes that have no dignity.

In Moscow there is a deadly architectural boredom, sometimes passed off as enlightenment, sometimes as vaccination, — and the city begins to shape itself, already it can't stop, and it piles up like rising bread dough, storey after storey.

But I'm not looking for the traces of the old days in the shaken and inflammable city: you really don't see weddings with four carriages passing through anymore, the wives like gloomy birth-day girls, the bride in white frills; you really don't see, in the bars where they serve Triplecrown beer with a saucer of soaked split peas and salty breadcrusts, the kind of man who leads the singing like a burly deacon, singing

together with his choir the Devil only knows what kind of hymn.

Right now it's summer — and the expensive fur coats are all in pawnshops — red raccoon and marten lie side by side on the tables, fresh-caught, like big harpooned fishes . . .

I love the banks, menageries of money-changers, where all the cashiers sit behind bars like dangerous beasts . . .

I'm less happy about the strong boots of the townspeople, about the men who wear grey imported English shirts, while you can see the crimson ribs of gaunt Red Army soldiers, as if with X-rays.

translated by Eve Shapiro

FOR THE POETS OF CHILE

Today I called for you,
my death, like a cup
of creamy milk I
could drink in the cold dawn,
I called you to come
down soon. I woke up
thinking of the thousands
in the futbol stadium
of Santiago de Chile,
and I went cold, shaking
my head as though
I could shake it away.
I thought of the men
and women who sang
the songs of their people
for the last time, I
thought of the precise
architecture of a man's wrist
ground down to powder.
That night when I fell asleep
in my study, the false
deaths and the real blurred
in my dreams. I called
out to die, and calling
woke myself to the empty
beer can, the cup
of ashes, my children
gone in their cars,
the radio still moaning.
A year passes, two,
and still someone must
stand at the window
as the night takes hold
remembering how once
there were the voices
of play rising

from the street,
and a man or woman
came home from work
humming a little tune
the way a child does
as he muses over
his lessons. Someone
must remember it over
and over, must bring
it all home and rinse
each crushed cell
in the waters of our lives
the way a god would.
Victor, who died
on the third day —
his song of outrage
unfinished — and was strung
up as an example to all,
Victor left a child,
a little girl
who must waken each day
before her mother
beside her, and dress
herself in the clothes
laid out the night
before. The house sleeps
except for her, the floors
and cupboards cry out
like dreamers. She goes
to the table and sets out
two forks, two spoons, two knives,
white linen napkins gone
gray at the edges,
the bare plates,
and the tall glasses
for the milk they must
drink each morning.

THE LIFE OF MARY

THE BIRTH OF MARY

O what it must have cost the angels not to
instantly break into song, the way we break into tears,
when they already knew: tonight the mother
is born of the child, the One, who will soon appear.

They silenced themselves, in mid-flight, and pointed to where
the solitary farm of Joachim lay,
and felt in themselves and in space the pure condensation —,
but none of them were allowed to go down there.

The two were already beside themselves with work.
A neighbor woman, feigning shrewdness, didn't know how.
And thoughtfully the old man hushed the mooing
of a dark cow: . . . it was never like this before.

THE PRESENTATION OF MARY IN THE TEMPLE

In order to grasp what she was like at that time,
first you must recall a place inside yourself
where pillars do work; where you can sense
that there are stairs; where precarious arches
span the abyss of a space
which only remained in you because it was built up
out of blocks that you can no longer lift
out of yourself without tearing yourself down.
If you can reach there, everything in you is stone,
wall, door, view, vault —, then try
to tear apart a little, with both hands,
the great curtain you have in front of you:
there high things give off a light
which eclipses your breath and touch.
Upward, downward, palaces rise above palaces,
broader parapets stream out of parapets
and reappear abruptly, above, on such walls
that in looking you are struck dizzy.
Meanwhile the clouds from the incense burners
overcast the area around you; but the farthest
things aim right into you with their rays —,
and when the light of clear bowls of flame
plays on the slowly approaching robes,
how can you bear it?

She came, though, and raised
her eyes to take all of this in.
(A child, a little girl in the midst of women.)
Then quietly and full of self-possession
she mounted toward all this display: it let her
have her way. Because the things men build
were completely surpassed by the praise

in her heart, and by her desire to
give herself up to what she secretly knew:

her parents fully intended to hand her over,
the menacing one with the jeweled breast
received her, apparently: and she walked right through
them,
small as she was, moving out of every hand
into her own destiny higher than the hall,
finished now, heavier than the house . . .

THE ANNUNCIATION

It isn't just that an angel appeared: realize this
isn't what startled her. She might have been
somebody else, and the angel
some sunlight or, at night, the moon
occupying itself in her room —, so quietly
she accustomed herself to the form he took.
She barely suspected that this kind of visit
is exhausting to angels. (O if we knew
how pure she was. Didn't a deer,
catching sight of her once in the forest,
lose itself so much in looking at her
that without coupling it conceived the unicorn,
the animal of light, the pure animal!)

It's not just that he appeared, but that he
placed the face of a young man so close
to hers: his gaze and the one
with which she answered it blended
so much, suddenly, that everything outside vanished
and what millions saw, built, and endured
crowded inside of them: only her and him:
seeing and seen, eye and whatever is beautiful to the eye
nowhere else but right here. *This*
is startling. And it startled them both.

Then the angel sang his song.

MARY'S VISIT

She still moved lightly at first,
though, climbing, she was already aware
of her miraculous body —,
then she stood, breathing, upon the high

hills of Judea. It was no longer that country
but her abundance that spread out before her;
going on, she felt: no one could ever go
beyond the greatness she now felt in herself.

And she longed to lay her hand upon
the other body, further along than hers.
And the women swayed toward each other
and touched one another's dress and hair.

Each sheltered herself in her kinswoman,
filled with her holiness.
Ah, the Savior in her was still blossom;
but even the Baptist inside her cousin's womb
reached out to her with delight.

JOSEPH'S SUSPICION

The angel spoke and went to great trouble
over this man with clenched fists:
Don't you see that in every recess
she is as cool as God's morning?

The other stared at him darkly
and muttered: Well, what has changed her?
Until the angel cried: Carpenter,
don't you see the Lord's hand in this *yet*?

Because you make boards, are you proud
enough to raise your voice to him
who modestly makes buds and leaves
grow out of the same wood?

He understood. And he looked up,
terribly shaken, to see the angel
who was gone. He stood there and slowly
pushed off his cap. Then sang in praise.

ANNUNCIATION TO THE SHEPHERDS

Get up, friends. Men there by the fire,
men used to searching the fathomless sky,
star-watchers, come here! See. I am a new
star rising. My entire being burns
and shines so intensely and is so enormously
full of light, that the deep firmament is
no longer enough for me. Let my radiance come
into your lives: o, the dark looks,
the dark hearts, nocturnal destinies
that fill you. Shepherds, how alone I am
in you. All at once I have room.
Don't look so astonished: the huge breadfruit tree
casts a shadow. Yes. Because of me.
Fearless ones, o if you knew
how in this moment the future shines
on your upturned faces! Much will take place
in this strong light. I open my mind to you
because you are so silent; to you good men
everything here speaks. Fire and rain speak,
passages of birds, the wind and what you are,
no one excels and increases in pride,
stuffing himself. You never clutch
things to the chest's cavity
in order to torture them. Ecstasy
streams through an angel the same way
the earthly goes through you. And if a thornbush
ignited suddenly, it would be the Lord
speaking to you; and if Cherubim
decided to appear walking alongside
your herd, it wouldn't surprise you:
you'd throw yourselves down on your faces
praying, and tell yourselves this is the earth . . .

It was. But now a new thing shall be
and cause the world to move in greater circles.
What is a thornbush to us: God appears
inside a virgin's womb. I am the light
of her ecstasy, that is with you.

THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

If you didn't have the simplicity, how could
this thing have happened to you, lighting the night?
Look: God, who thundered over the people,
makes himself gentle and comes through you into the world.

Had you imagined him greater?

What is greatness? His destiny moves in a straight
line through all measurements, crossing them out.
Not even a star has a path like his.
Look how great these kings are, look

how they bring before your lap, your womb

great treasures they thought the greatest.
And perhaps you're astonished by their gifts —:
But look, again, in the folds of your clothes,
how he already surpasses all that.

All amber, brought from far off,

all wrought gold and aromatic spices
that move about, blurred, in your senses:
all of that belonged to one brief, hurried moment
and in the end one regrets it . . .

But (you will see): he brings joy.

REST ON THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT

Having just now flown, out of
breath, from the slaughter of children:
o how imperceptibly they had grown
great in the course of their wandering.

The horror in their timid looks
back over their shoulders had barely disappeared,
and on their gray mule they were already
bringing danger to entire cities;

for as they approached — small in a huge
land, nothing — the strong temples,
the idols broke down as if unmasked
and completely lost their minds.

Is it conceivable that on account of their
passage all things grew so desperately enraged?
And they grew frightened of themselves,
only the child was strangely at ease.

Nevertheless they were forced to
sit down for a while: but, look
what happened: the still tree above them
there, like someone serving:

it bowed. The identical tree
whose garlands preserve the foreheads
of dead pharaohs for all time
bowed. It felt new crowns
blossoming. And they sat as if in a dream.

THE MARRIAGE AT CANA

How could she not have been proud of him
who, at her simplest, made her beautiful?
Even the night, the night which surrounds everything,
went beyond itself the moment he appeared.

Didn't his once overstepping himself
add, incomprehensibly, to his glory?
And didn't the wisest exchange their mouths
for their ears? And didn't the house

seem new again holding his voice? Yes,
there must have been hundreds of times
when she had to restrain her delight
from shining on him. She followed him, in awe.

But there at the wedding,
when suddenly the wine was gone,
she glanced at him and asked him for some gesture
without seeing that he was unwilling . . .

But he did it. She understood later
that she had forced him into it:
he had caused a miracle, it couldn't be
stopped, the course of his life was decided

forever. Yes, it was written down.
But was it already prepared for?
She: she brought it about
in her pride's blindness.

She sat at the table covered with fruit
and vegetables, taking part, oblivious
to the fact that the water in her tear-glands
had turned into blood with the wine.

BEFORE THE PASSION

If this is what you wanted, you shouldn't have
been allowed to come out of a woman's body.
Saviors ought to be born out of mountains
where the hard is broken from the hard.

Doesn't it trouble you at all to devastate
your lovely valley? Look at my frailty:
I have nothing, only brooks of milk and tears,
and you were always on the strongest side.

How lavishly you were promised to me!
Why didn't you go out of me terribly, all at once?
When all you need are tigers to tear you to pieces
why did they bring me up in the women's house

to sew pure white clothes for you
in which there isn't the slightest trace
of a seam to scratch you —: my whole life was like that.
And now all at once you alter nature's course.

PIETÀ

Now my anguish is whole. It is unspeakable,
it fills me. I am numb
like the stone's core.
I am hard, and know only one thing:
you grew big —
. . . and grew big,
in order to stand outside
my heart, a pain
bigger than it is capable of.
Now you're lying right across my lap,
now I can no longer give you
birth.

QUIETING OF MARY AT THE RESURRECTION

What they felt at that moment: isn't it
sweeter than any other secret
and at the same time earthly:
the moment he met her, relieved, still
a little pale from the grave:
every part of his body risen.
Met her first! It would be impossible
to say how much it healed them.
Yes, they were healing, that's all. Without even having to
touch each other very hard.
For hardly a second he
laid his almost
eternal hand on her woman's shoulder.
And quietly
like the trees when spring comes,
together from then on
they began this season
of their final intimacy . . .

THE DEATH OF MARY

I

The identical angel, the great one who
once brought down the news of her conception
stood there, waiting for her to notice him
and said: It is now time for you to appear.
And as before she was startled and thereby proved
herself the maiden, deeply confirming what he knew.
Then he grew radiant and stepped so near
he disappeared into her face — and summoned
the apostles who'd gone out in every direction
to gather again in the house on the slope,
the house of the last supper. They came, this time
it was harder, and entered in fear: she lay
there in the narrow bed, weirdly immersed
in her election and in her dying,
completely intact, like one unused
in life, tuned to angelic song.
Only when she noticed them waiting behind
their candles, she tore herself from
the excess of voices and out of her heart
she gave away the two dresses she owned,
and lifted her eyes to them one at a time . . .
(o source of incomprehensible streams of tears).

She lay back again in her weariness
drawing the sky down so near to Jerusalem
that to step outside her her soul
had only to stretch a little: already
the one who knew everything about her
was lifting her into her own divinity.

II

Who would have thought that before her coming
the myriad heaven was still incomplete?
The resurrected one had taken his seat
but the seat beside him had been vacant
for twenty-four years. They had already
begun to get used to that pure omission
that was as if healed over, filled by the son's
overflowing of light . . .

Therefore the moment she stepped into heaven,
as much as she longed to, she didn't approach him:
there was no room, only he was there, giving
a radiance that hurt her eyes.
And yet as her shining ghost
went in among the newly blessed
and took her place inconspicuously, light
among light, there broke from her the repression
of so much light that angels illuminated
by her cried out in awe: Who is she?
Utter astonishment. Then all of them saw
how God the father eclipsed our Lord
so that with a twilight around it
the empty place grew visible, like
a little sadness, a sign of loneliness,
something he still endured, a residue
of earthly time, a partially healed wound.
They looked to her: leaning ahead, she looked
at him anxiously, as if to say: I am
his longest suffering. And suddenly she pitched forward.
But the angels lifted her up, supported her
and singing carried her the last few feet in air.

III

Then an angel appeared before the Apostle
Thomas, who came too late —, a swift angel
prepared for this long in advance
who commanded, at the grave:

Move the stone aside. Do you want to know
where she is, the one who moved your heart?
Look: she was placed in there for a while
like a pillow of lavender

so that in the future the earth
would smell of her in its folds, like her clothes.
Everything dead (you must feel it), everything sick
is numbed by her good fragrance.

Look at the graveclothes: where is the bleaching place
where they would be made to shine and not decay?
The light from her pure corpse
purified them more than the sunlight.

Doesn't it astonish you, how gently she took leave of them.
It's as if she still wore them, nothing's touched.
And yet above us the heavens are torn!
Friend, kneel here. Look after me when I go, and sing.

translated by Franz Wright

WOMEN WITH CHILDREN WITH WINTER:

The individual flakes, precise
As windows into conscience, are ignored
For a total sense of softening;
Our houses and the hills
With their stiff black trees rising
Behind all the scattered colors
Of children in the snow. So we think
Of interiors as contour, as a leg

That grows muscular and dark with bending
In the night. This last expression
Of a day
Says the incurable past was not cruel
But an exciting in-between, a scarlet weather
We muffle the exactness of; the way
We drag our children
Into heavy clothes for entering winter.

We live
With this hazy version of ourselves
As charming figures
Turning down the sheets, but wish
We were perfectly beautiful
As often the children are
In sleep. Their startling scent
Is remote and sexual
Like the golden breasts dreamt of by a man
In his chair: the slow bodies

Pulling back and out of breath, escape
The keeping of it, the lunar form
Of what we haven't learned

But thought we had in memory
When, like now,
Last winter was filled with snow

And revolving silhouettes!

THE COLUMBINE FIELDS AT EASTER

Thomas James 1946-1973.

It burns, this idea of red and white, a finger
Pricked in snow behind a shed: a ceremony
That wishes to marry an absence.
A sister, itself, or the small season
That flickers in April when the tiny
Points of a wildflower we shouldn't touch
Are irresistible as those old bonewhite
Fingers stitching up
The ragged breast of an ornamental dove.

It fell too many times
From the Easter branch by the door
Surviving, after all, its first self
As sawdust and crushed glass. The pale columbine

By the edge of the woods dips its beak
Like a needle in the mouth of a dead bird
That drills
Through the diamond wreckage of someone
Whose hollow bones spilled out all the words
Of a visit, of flight across a dappled field
With water and ice that's torn from us.
The audience

Of the dead is our most demanding, a soft
Flower bell that can't endure us, or
This fire from nowhere:
A flock of returning birds
That drops down on our meadow to be fed

By God: by men weaving through the gate
From the woods as though a thin
Seam bound our worlds of light
And dark, that are

These bundles of flaming columbine, gentle
In our arms like the bodies of the dead.

AT SEA

I remember someone saying once
— who'd never seen the ocean —
that the skin rubbed from the drowned
flames coldly there at night.
This boat has been my bed
and table now for days
and I've seen that fire
but there's a warmth about it.
Somehow, like a hearth,
it makes me feel at home.
I think I could go on
holding on like this for life.

*

I do get scared sometimes,
illusions billow toward me;
they can be touched. I shake
my father's hand and we observe
the weather. The distance we maintain
is natural, the wind that slams
between us like a door
is not. A wave will fall
and there will be my wife walking
as if back to bed asleep, or
she will not be there. The waves will fold
back, and nothing will be there.

*

Of course, the calms are the worst.
I think I am some useless,
fourlimbed fish, dangling
my arms between my knees.
I don't believe in land;
water, if it took me back,
would cripple me. I've rocked
myself like this before,
once outside a bedroom
where I knew death was working,
humming a little to calm myself
because it was too calm.

*

Lately, I'm less certain.
Though I wake up always knowing
where I am, really
I don't know. I lie letting the sun
blister me as I sleep.
I stare all night at the moon.
I was sure the current under me
would grow colder, slower,
like a blood stream running
too far from the heart, that all
of this would end, and it continues.

SOMETHING ABOUT URGENCY

1.

Of course I speak slowly.
Like the way I walk through my room
slowly. Lifting things
deliberately, the way you'd
lift me to your shoulders.
"If I start washing the walls,
tie me down!"

Struggling to untie the package
you've sent, I see you
tying it up
with the same white string.

Lips pressed,
your fingers wrapping it
over, pulling it tight,
over and over
until nothing
could pull it open.

All the furniture
in your house wound tight, tied down
like the car trunk
full of frozen baggage.
A finger pressed into my chin.
Everything's covered.

2.

You talk about a need
for restraint — a discipline
for its own sake. You try to
fling it out on the table:
small tasks that lead you
from day to day.
“This is how it’s done.”

I keep sewing things up.
Is there a doctor in me?
The joints at the back of my jaw
begin to ache, the stitches pull,
a pain slips in, stretches out.
It’s nothing
I can walk out on.

There were scissors once
and whole cloth. I would lay it out flat
and trace the pattern — chalky
dotted lines that collided
and merged.

3.

Do you remember tying my shoes?
I'm always tying them
together. The sky sways
the branches unevenly. I lose
my balance just watching,

lean to one side,
start to run,
the knots in my face
unravel.

I'm pulling
at the sleeve of an old dress.
It drops over my wrist,
you sit down again.
It seems to make so much sense.
I'm sorry — we want to remember,
my God, it's so good
to remember.

But all the stitches split,
the ground gives way
to a kind of embrace,
an urge to bolt forward.
I hear my shoes
dropping behind me now.
My ribs go on swaying all night.

LANGUAGE: THE POET AS MASTER AND SERVANT

My subject is the special qualities of language that I think characterize the best modern poetry, and since what I have to say will inevitably be an expression of personal taste and bias, I may as well begin with personal anecdote. The time is 1954 and I am a college freshman, a newly fledged reader and writer of poetry. I have the habit of browsing in the library stacks, looking for volumes of American poetry that interest me; one day I pull out a volume by a poet named Wallace Stevens, *The Auroras of Autumn*, published four years earlier. I have no idea who the poet is, no inkling that I have inadvertently entered the late phase of a great and difficult poet who to this day tends to elude his commentators. What I do know *immediately* is that I am in the presence of language that is used in exciting and brilliant combinations. Poems have titles like "Large Red Man Reading," "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," "Saint John and the Back-Ache." Opening at random, I find passages like the following:

The crows are flying above the foyer of summer.
The winds batter it. The water curls. The leaves
Return to their original illusions.

The sun stands like a Spaniard as he departs,
Stepping from the foyer of summer into that
Of the past, the rodomontadean emptiness.

*Mother was afraid I should freeze in the Parisian hotels.
She had heard of the fate of an Argentine writer. At night,
He would go to bed, cover himself with blankets —*

*Protruding from the pile of wool, a hand,
In a black glove, holds a novel by Camus. She begged
That I stay away. These are the words of José . . .
from "The Novel"*

Though the poem is beyond me, the effect of the language is immediately intoxicating and I recognize that I have encountered a poet whose words and ways will be important to me

for the rest of my life. I carry the book around for weeks, taking small, delighted sips.

Jump ahead a few years now. It is the fall of 1957, I am a senior and I now know my way around the library and the work of modern poets with some confidence. One day, in the English Department office, I notice a new book on the shelves where the textbooks are kept. It's called *Fifteen Modern American Poets*, edited by George P. Elliott, and contains many names that are new to me. I happen to open it to the work of a poet named Roethke. I have by this time learned to be wary of flashy effects; my teacher Reed Whitemore has written wittily and instructively about "goody-droppers," poets who create dazzling surfaces but don't finally have much beer under all that foam. On that basis I have begun to qualify my admiration for Dylan Thomas and the early Robert Lowell. But Roethke has an unmistakable ring of authenticity, and the beginning of a poem called "Give Way, Ye Gates," jumps right off the page at me:

Believe me, knot of gristle, I bleed like a tree;
I dream of nothing but boards;
I could love a duck.

Such music in a skin!
A bird sings in the bush of your bones.
Tufty, the water's loose.
Bring me a finger. This dirt's lonesome for grass.
Are the rats dancing? The cats are.
And you, cat after great milk and vasty fishes,
a moon loosened from a stag's eye,
Twiced me nicely, —
In the green of my sleep,
In the green.

Again, the meaning mystifies me. Roethke seems to be defying the rules of clarity, and aside from an obvious preoccupation with sexuality, the poem seems to have no discernible subject. But I am ready to trust the poet because of the brilliance with which he is using language. It's like that

moment in *King Lear* when Kent says he wants to serve Lear; he admits he doesn't know who Lear is, but says "you have that in your countenance I would fain call master." "What's that?" Lear asks, and Kent answers: "Authority." Later I was to see Roethke's explanations, that he wanted poetry "to extend consciousness as far, as deeply, as particularly as it can," and that he sought to write poems "which try in their rhythms to catch the very movement of the mind itself." Those statements would help me to explain my excitement, but I did not need them before I could begin to feel it, any more than I had with Stevens.

Enough about me as ephebe in the Fifties. I have introduced these bits of personal history only to suggest a way of thinking and talking about the bewildering variety of contemporary poetry that surrounds us; the energy and mastery of language to which we respond even before we discern "subject" or "meaning" may also provide a source of discrimination and evaluation. I advance this standard a little defiantly, not because I think I have discovered or rediscovered an infallible touchstone (it did not take me as quickly into all the poets I have come to revere, e.g. Williams), but because it seems to be at odds with the way so many people, critics and reviewers especially, find poetry worthy of praise or blame. If it has any worth, its use, which I will sketch out with some negative and positive examples, may help readers to trust their own responses more fully. It may even persuade some critics (I am having a fit of optimism) to modify their categories of importance and enlarge their sense of the distinctive features that language as poetry ought to have.

Let me try to define my subject a little more fully; am I addressing myself to sound? rhythm? diction (what Hugh Kenner calls "the family alliances of words")? Alas, I cannot be quite that precise. I am addressing myself to the totality of effects whereby the poet, any poet, makes language special and unique, sets it off from its mundane and prosaic uses. In any given poet the components of this total will differ

radically enough that no formula can be applied in advance. We will recognize the achievement, I've suggested, in part by the immediacy of our response, by results. Later, using patience and hindsight, we may put together a description of the particulars. Thus in the case of Stevens we would want to talk about the ingenious control of diction that accommodates words like "foyer" and "rodomontadean" to words like "crows" and "winds" and "sun." That would have to include a glance at the effect of proper names — "Spaniard," "Parisian," "Argentine," "Camus," "José" — in the passage I quoted. The movement of the poem, by which I mean its rhythms from phrase to phrase and line to line, as well as its remarkable ability to do jump-shifts that appear to change the subject drastically when in fact there is genuine continuity, is another factor. And the sound itself is masterful. The line "The sun stands like a Spaniard . . ." wins us with its image but also with its sound relationships, especially "stands" and "Spaniard." The overall effect is a sense that there is nothing this poet cannot do with language. Since we are as often as not at the mercy of language, fighting for good words, good sense and eloquence, Stevens' easy command of it breeds the excitement and wonder I spoke of earlier. A similar exercise with Roethke would make us particularly attentive again to patterns of sound, to the effects and kinships of his short, bullet-like sentences, to the crafty mixture of interrogation, exclamation, assertion and command he employs, and ultimately to those declarations of purpose I cited earlier about extension of consciousness and the rhythms of the mind. Any fine poet's mix is distinctive, so that my subject resists generalization and must, as I've suggested, be explored through examples.

Choosing these examples, especially the negative ones, is bound to mislead, as though I am going out of my way to attack some of my contemporaries; but I have in fact selected arbitrarily from poems and poets that happened to come to my attention within a period of two months. What follows

is not a series of pet peeves and predilections, but my reaction, as in the anecdotes about my salad days, to my current browsing among books and periodicals.

Let me begin, then, with a poet, A. R. Ammons, and a critic, Harold Bloom. Bloom's essay, in a recent issue of *Salmagundi*, is called "A. R. Ammons: The Breaking of the Vessels," and it bemused me precisely because of the discrepancy between my own reactions to Ammons' work and those of Bloom. I should add that this was not my first encounter with either figure. Ammons is a much-praised and laurelled poet, and Bloom is one of our best-known literary critics, who certainly deserves respect and praise for his willingness to consider poetry as a phenomenon of the present as well as the past. But I admit to not having had as much success with the work of either man as their reputations would seem to warrant, so I was glad to have an opportunity for another look at both. Bloom begins his essay with the serious claim that "No contemporary poet, in America, is likelier to become a classic than A. R. Ammons," and is soon quoting directly from Ammons' recent *Sphere: The Form of a Motion*:

. . . the gods have come and gone
(or we have made them come and go) so long among
us that
they have communicated something of the sky to
us making us
feel that at the division of the roads our true way, too,
is to the sky where with unborn gods we may know no
further death and need no further visitations: what
may have
changed is that in the future we can have the force
to keep
the changes secular: the one: many problem,
set theory, and
symbolic signifier, the pyramid, the pantheon (of gods and

men), the pecking order, baboon troupe, old man of
the tribe,
the hierarchy of family, hamlet, military, church,
corporation,
civil service, of wealth, talent — everywhere the
scramble for
place, power, privilege, safety, honor, the representative
notch above the undistinguished numbers:
second is as good
as last: pyramidal hierarchies and solitary persons; the
hierarchies having to do with knowledge and law . . .

Bloom goes on quoting for six more lines, but I'll stop there. Now, what does Bloom have to say about this passage? He calls it "extravagantly pell-mell" and finds it characteristic of a struggle that recurs in Ammons' poetry between a union of mind and nature and a belief that nature can never be adequate to the mind. The first view has, he says, a transcendental strain, "but the second is almost unmatched in our century in its exaltation and high sorrow." Presumably "exaltation and high sorrow" characterize the passage in question.

It amazes me, frankly, that that passage seems to strike Bloom as fine poetry. I cannot see why he does not find the language and movement of it inadequate: wordy, uninteresting, flaccid. It might do as prose, if you liked that sort of philosophizing, but I cannot see anything distinctive about its diction or any significant justification for its lack of economy and intensity. To me, "extravagantly pell-mell" is a polite way of saying "Ammons won't shut up," and Bloom's characterization of Ammons as a "fierce Emersonian" may serve to remind us that Emerson was a master of prose, not poetry.

But one example may be unfair. Let us move on. Bloom next quotes several passages in which Ammons talks about, and with, the wind:

I went to the summit and stood in the high nakedness:
the wind tore about this
way and that in confusion and its speech could not
get through to me nor could I address it:

*

Actually the wind said I'm
if anything beneficial
resolving extremes
filling up lows with highs
No I said you don't have
to explain
it's just the way things are

*

unlike the wind
that dies and
never dies I said
I must go on
consigned to
form that will not
let me loose
except to death
till some
syllable's rain
anoints my tongue
and makes it sing
to strangers

The first of these is from *Sphere*, the second and third from earlier work, *The Wide Land* and *Joshua Tree*. I have shortened what Bloom quotes in the first two instances, but not, I think, distortively. Now, it's interesting that Ammons talks about the wind a lot in his poetry, but the recurrent problem I see in all three passages is precisely that he does talk about it, rather than render it for us convincingly. And when the wind itself talks, in the second quote, it sounds more like Ammons. In each passage there is diction that I think a good poet would flinch at — "high nakedness," "resolving extremes," "consigned to form" — because it is prosaic and explanatory. The movement of the second passage seems reasonably effective, while the first and third are clumsy and facile, respectively. None of the passages uses language in a way that produces excitement or interest in me or makes me want to read more.

But none of this seems to concern Bloom. Around the

quotation of these lines he is busy talking about "the extraordinary poignance of prophetic self-presentation," about Ammons being "punished into song." He says that we can say "that the wind, throughout his poetry, serves as Virgil to Ammons' Dante," that "the wind subsumes those aspects of the Emersonian-Whitmanian tradition that have found and touched Ammons." Ammons, he goes on, "always affectionate towards the wind, confronts it more directly than any poet since Shelley." Well, who cares? If these connections and cross-references are to be of use, they must surely be based on a distinctive, masterful poetry. Throughout the essay, Bloom never really deals with this issue: he seems to assume that Ammons' greatness, if we have any doubts about it, will be demonstrated by the passages cited for discussion. And that, as I've suggested, is just what doesn't happen in my case. The poetry sounds mostly graceless and garrulous to me, and no amount of impressive analogy from the Lurianic Kabbalah or talk of "the High Romantic quest for oblivion" will make that problem go away. The trouble with Bloom's criticism, I suspect, is that it is interested in ideas, as they appear in analogous patterns in Romantic and modern poets, while poetry, as poets have been trying to make clear for some time now, is not written with ideas but with words. At the level of language, where good poetry is to be distinguished from bad, Bloom seems to lack the necessary attention and discrimination.

I should add that of course Ammons is not responsible for the claims a critic makes on his behalf. He may very well be embarrassed by the kind of attention that Bloom and others have lavished on him. But I can't help thinking how much more useful it might have been to him as a working poet if critics, sympathetic or unsympathetic, had addressed themselves to the inadequacies of texture, movement, and diction in his work instead of making him grist for their theoretical mills.

Let me move on to another poet, this time without a critic in tow. My second choice is Diane Wakoski. A poem of hers

called "Harry Moon from My Child's Anthology of Verse" came to my attention just the other day because one of the editors of a magazine called *Grove* asked me if I had liked "the Wakoski poem." I realized I had not read it through, which is what often happens with me and a Wakoski poem. I sat down to have another try. It's a fairly long poem, approaching two hundred lines. I'll quote a few representative passages to give an idea of its subject and manner:

People want to create themselves
as characters,
as the principle actors in their own . . .
no, I will not say
"drama"

Wisdom, no, that is not the word either.
age? maturity? vision? sensibility?
something begins to give the unspoken,
the unnamed more credibility;
silence becomes the only rejoinder.

*

Saturn.
The planet of silence.
Its rings of broken rock. Rocky silence.
Circle me.
Marry my lips to each other.
I was once the moon,
a small body causing the tides.
are
accidental.

Names

*

In my mind, I knew
that I savoured
in my own mind
the *idea* of walking on the beach,
barefoot in the rain,
but actually I was sitting by the fire,
savouring in my mind
a girl riding naked on her zebra,
in the rain,
wearing only her diamonds.

The passage I quoted first is the beginning of the poem, and that is where I must have stopped the first time around, because it seems to me exceptionally undistinguished as poetic language. It lacks economy, energy, wit, particularity, grace of movement, or interest as sound. The other two passages are on the whole more interesting, but not by much. They are not only characterized in themselves by a kind of repetitive insistence, but they take their place in a poem that circles back round again and again to the same words, phrases, ideas. The image of riding naked on the zebra, for example, shows up four times. Walking barefoot in the rain comes up seven times. It is not as though the poem modifies the meanings of the images in a way that makes their recurrence striking or welcome. It is rather as though the poet hoped that the constant recirculation of the images would make them powerful or believable. And indeed the general repetitiveness and rambling effect of the poem suggest a belief that colorless language moving along without strong or intense rhythms will transcend itself if it is insisted upon at sufficient length. I don't find that to be true; I am less convinced by the time I get to the end.

Wakoski fans will not agree with me, and they must surely exist, for she is well known, frequently anthologized, reviewed with respect, and has read her poetry about as widely as any American poet I know of. That last point is worth acknowledging; a poem like this will do better out loud, not because of rich and subtle sound effects — there aren't any — but because we are less bothered by the garrulous and repetitive when we hear it than when we see it. If the poet speaks the words of the poem, we are saved the efforts of scanning the page word by word, and can tune in or out as we like. And I think we are often tempted by things that make poetry easier for us, such as a dwelling on the obvious, because poetry is hard work; we have to muster our best and most concentrated attention for reading or hearing it when it is good.

Is there anything else that accounts for Wakoski's reputation, that causes readers to overlook the prosaic and meander-

ing features of her work? I think there is; it lies this time not in the kind of intellectual games Bloom can play with Ammons, but in her sincerity. She is a vigorous, likeable person; if her poetry lacks concentration and energy, she does not, and there is something very attractive to our culture about her self-promotion and her willingness to spread her feelings out as openly as she does in her poetry — to ride naked, as it were, on her zebra. But the point I am pressing is that personal sincerity, as in her case, and playing around with ideas, in the case of Ammons, are no *substitute* for the heightened and magical command of language that characterizes good poetry. Neither, for that matter, are moral earnestness, political commitment, theological concern, or frankness about one's sex life. Any of these elements may serve to enhance a poem, but that is not the same as saying that they can be equivalent to the sound, movement, energy and economy that language ought to have in poetry.

Ammons and Wakoski were brought together here, as I've suggested, more or less by chance, and few commentators would think to lump them together. But they share, it seems to me, a fatal discursiveness, a strange conviction that any word or thought that issues from the poet's pen or mouth must by nature be poetry if it is sincere or thoughtful. If I've seemed to grumble, it's because poets who know how hard-won the real stuff is resent easy approximations. If I had to find a phrase to characterize the work of these two writers, I would call them "verse essayists," in order to distinguish their use of language from the language of lyric poetry. And if my subject here was the verse essay I would embark on a discussion of its variants and practitioners. It seems to exist in at least three categories: the Whitman sort, which Ammons and Wakoski roughly share; the Pound sort, rather spuriously based on *The Cantos*; and the Auden variety, chatty and tasteful and clever, based on the poet's late work. Perhaps the verse essay is a respectable and legitimate genre, but I wish it wouldn't be confused with lyric poetry; if you order bourbon and get ginger-ale because someone thinks they are roughly

the same thing, you have a right to protest. There are writers who mix the two (essay and lyric) effectively, who manage to combine the discursive and prosaic elements of the verse essay with the exhilarations of poetic language, e.g. John Ashbery, but this is not the place to discuss highballs or analyze brands of ginger-ale. Take what I've just said as a cautious little digression.

I turn now to my positive examples. If my comments thus far have suggested that there are poets who, despite the praise they have received, lack the mastery of language that would affect some hypothetical undergraduate as Stevens and Roethke affected me, I want to go on to argue that there are indeed poets and poems these days that reflect such mastery and should produce such excitement. Again, I will simply draw on my recent reading for these examples, without implying that they are the sole instances I could come up with and without insisting that my criterion for discriminating them from poets like Ammons and Wakoski is the only one that should be used.

My first example is Charles Wright. I had known and liked this poet's work previously, but it was his new book, *Bloodlines*, which I read quite recently, that gave me, from the start, a sense that I was in the presence of a poet whose care for words and mastery of the possibilities of language were of a very high order. I am going to take the first poem in that collection, where I had my first strong reaction, and where most readers might have theirs. Quoting the poem in its entirety may seem unfair to Ammons and Wakoski, whom I dealt with in excerpts, until you recall that my point about them was partly that they went on at a length I did not care to follow because their language lacked essential interest. With Wright's poem, "Virgo Descending," there was no question of my not finishing the poem:

Through the viridian (and black of the burnt match),
Through ox-blood and ochre, the ham-colored clay,
Through plate after plate, down
Where the worm and the mole will not go,

Through ore-seam and fire-seam,
My grandmother, senile and 89, crimpbacked, stands
Like a door ajar on her soft bed,
The open beams and bare studs of the hall
Pink as an infant's skin in the floating dark,
Shavings and curls swing down like snowflakes across her
face.

My aunt and I walk past. As always, my father
Is planning rooms, dragging his lame leg,
Stroke-straightened and foreign, behind him,
An aberrant 2-by-4 he can't fit snug.
I lay my head on my aunt's shoulder, feeling
At home, and walk on.
Through arches and door jambs, the spidery wires
And coiled cables, the blueprint takes shape:
My mother's room to the left, the door closed;
My father's room to the left, the door closed —

Ahead, my brother's room, unfinished;
Behind my sister's room, also unfinished.
Buttresses, winches, block-and-tackle: the scale of
everything
Is enormous. We keep on walking. And pass
My aunt's room, almost complete, the curtains up,
The lamp and the medicine arranged
In their proper places, in arm's reach of where the bed
will go . . .
The next one is mine, now more than half done,
Cloyed by the scent of jasmine,
White-gummed and anxious, their mouths sucking the
air dry.

Home is what you lie in, or hang above, the house
Your father made, or keeps on making,
The dirt you moisten, the sap you push up and nourish . . .
I enter the living room, it, too, unfinished, its far wall
Not there, opening on to a radiance
I can't begin to imagine, a light
My father walks from, approaching me,
Dragging his right leg, rolling his plans into a perfect curl.
That light, he mutters, that damned light.
We can't keep it out. It keeps on filling your room.

There is much to praise here — the skillful mixing of life and death, waking and sleeping, familiar and strange, as well as the narrative power and the sense of exact detail — but what I am going to emphasize is the fact that language in this poem becomes a separate and magical reality; it may resemble language as we ordinarily know and use it, but it transcends that use in its power to express what we had thought inexpressible. We experience descent and dream and death, terror and wonder and acceptance, we go where the worm and the mole cannot go, because the language takes us there, makes it real. To say that this is because of the sound of the poem, or its movement, or its imagery, or its juxtapositions of sense-textures, is impossible, because it is of course all of these, working in a powerful combination unique to this poem. But an example or two will illuminate the combination. Take the pair of lines in the first stanza:

My grandmother, senile and 89, crimpbacked, stands
Like a door ajar on her soft bed,

Anyone who writes poetry can tell you that it is very difficult to write a line as long as that first one, with that many pauses in it, and get it to hold together and seem inevitable. There are three “ands” in the line (“grandmother,” “and,” “stands”), at the beginning, middle, and end. There are three long i vowels, one hidden in the number “89”. There is an attentive exploitation of the power of consonants to invoke physical experience, most clearly exemplified in the word “crimpbacked.” To use that particular word, a relatively rare one, with that exactness and in that precisely contrived context, is evidence of a care for language and a love of the individuality of words that ought to characterize the work of a good poet. I included the line that follows for contrast; it is short and it looks easier. We might simply marvel at the comparison, “Like a door ajar on her soft bed.” But that kind of simplicity is, if anything, harder to come by, and the rhythm and sound of the line, its balance and succinctness, have as much to do with its effectiveness as the simile itself. And of course the way the two

lines go together, long and short, hectic and smooth, emphatic and relaxed, helps to remind us that mutual enhancement must occur not only among the words of a line but from line to line and throughout the poem.

I'll take my second example, or group of examples, from the last stanza. Notice how it begins: "Home is what you lie in, or hang above, the house / Your father made, or keeps on making,". It sounds a bit like Frost for a moment, but in this context there is a walloping difference. I cite it to illustrate the rhetorical range of the poem; when this poet sounds discursive, it is not because he doesn't know what else to do, or doesn't care, but because he wants to borrow from and echo discursive language (and that is often the case with Frost too, of course, though not perhaps as often as we'd like) for a special purpose. Look at the next line, as the 'discursiveness' is displaced: "The dirt you moisten, the sap you push up and nourish . . ." "Moisten . . sap . . push up . . nourish" — surely the immediacy through careful choice of words and sounds is self-evident. Watch how the beautiful line-breaks, the *turns* of the verse, act out the meaning in the lines that follow:

I enter the living room, it, too, unfinished, its far wall
Not there, opening on to a radiance
I can't begin to imagine, a light
My father walks from, approaching me.

And then the last three lines, end-stopped for equally valid reasons, with the double consonant words — "Dragging," "rolling" "mutters," and "filling" — as just one instance of the powerful interweaving of individual words as patterns of vowel and consonant and meaning that characterizes this poem and the book in which it occurs. Wright's poem, for me at least, shines and pulses with its love of language and the evocation of language's special powers for poetry. Most important of all, perhaps, is that all of its effects flow toward its total meaning and purpose. None are used for their own sake, to dazzle or impress us; there is no "goody-dropping" here.

Since Wright's book has obviously made an enthusiast of me, I must resist a strong temptation to go on — about this poem and about the rest of the book. It would be relevant to my subject to say why I think "ham-colored clay" is so superb, but that would require another paragraph, as would a consideration of Wright's mastery of lists, here and elsewhere. But I must move on to other examples. I want to talk about two poets whose work I had not seen until this month, poets who are new and not well known. The point I want to make, of course, is that the kind of excellence I am calling for is not limited to master poets of the recent or distant past, or even relatively established poets of the present, like Charles Wright (*Bloodlines* is his third book). It will always turn up, I suspect, as long as we have language, poets who care deeply about it, and readers who can respond.

A first book by a poet named Reg Saner, *Climbing into the Roots*, reached my desk just two weeks before I began this essay. It came with credentials — the Walt Whitman Award for a first book of poetry — but credentials don't always tell you much. The test must finally lie in your own reactions. Reg Saner lives in Colorado and writes a lot about the mountains. What's important is not my recognition that he knows them, but his ability to make me know them, to take me there, finding language that is adequate to the experience of climbing in the Rockies. Here are the first two sections of his poem, "Camping the Divide: Indian Peaks, Colorado":

1

Refrigerator tropics. Trees thick
as rain. Even the light is sopping.
We climb following a bootlace
stream, creek and waterfall by turns
through forest so dense
the dead spruce can barely topple.
They squeak down, taking years
to hit. Hummocks muzzle windfallen pine
that dissolves in a lard of sponge
stumps and fern swale

deepening the bog-soft ground.
On a log wide as a barge or small
fat ship I straddle and watch the stream
pour by, falling alongside so fast
it's hard to believe we're not
headed to the Divide by water.

2

At timberline we begin hiking
the grand smash and hurl
over a crockery grind of shale —
working up a perfectly useless sweat,
hugging boxcar faults like lovers —
to squirm among
this difficult magnificence
where we are most our own.

Evocative, hard-won, carefully marshalled language. The poet must know the things he writes of, know their ways and their particular, beautiful names, and he must have considered deeply how to move us forward among this welter of detail. The overall effect, compounded of sound, movement, imagery and precise juxtaposition ("bootlace stream" "crockery grind of shale," "boxcar faults") is an exhilarating tension of the sublime and the ridiculous, of gravity and legerity. Since we have had Ammons on wind, I think we ought to look at the third section of this poem too:

3

Here in the havoc country
what's left of trees finishes in talons.
The split sky goes manic, booming
its laundry strangle up down and sideways
at once. Nubbled trunks of Engleman
and fir, wrist-thick, blown bald
as potato skin in front. A bossy
one-way wind unfurling this last, highest
lake. We watch its ice-water chop
jogging in place.

I don't suppose this would lead any critic to talk of "the extraordinary poignance of prophetic self-presentation," or say that the wind is Virgil to Saner's Dante, or claim that he confronts it more directly than any poet since Shelley. But surely the wind is *here*, present to us, in this passage in a way that was not the case with Ammons. And it's worth stressing that Saner is not simply evoking the mountains, rockslides, water and wind for the sake of impressing us with his descriptive abilities. You'll recall that Bloom spoke of the struggle in Ammons' work between a union of mind and nature and a disjunction of the two. Well that struggle, or tension, is far more present and moving in Saner's poem than in the passages cited from Ammons. Here is its final section:

Like the dead we see ourselves
slipping off into the weather. Delicate
flurries of white and whiskery ash
stir from a few red lumps
as the old wind rises again. We stretch
in mummy bags to the chin, timing
our talk to the tent's nylon whip and crackle.
Near the bank where water tongues
try the lips of stones
a gone light winks and paddles,
making wingbeats in our eyes.
We follow it further off
into a mindless applause that carries
and fades — daylight broken into voices,
our hike's big picture breaking
down, its sky blown over the lake's lower
edge and falling apart
into the Valley of the North St. Vrain.
Under us all night we hear dark stones
talking over the way we came. And somewhere
far back in our sleep
feel a high river, going home.

Is that not plain enough, not discursive enough, for a critic who might want to plug in Whitman or Shelley? It is for me, in fact it's just right. I would grant that Saner is sometimes a

little too self-conscious about what he's doing and how he is accomplishing it, but that's a pebble compared to the boulders that obstruct me in the over-insistent and shoddy language of my negative examples. I'm willing to stay with Saner's poem because I develop a kind of trust based on his care for and love of language, his willingness to muster all its resources for a serious purpose. I want a poet to love language more than message, more than himself/herself. Is that formula unfair?

My next example is a young poet, Greg Pape, whom I know only from a new collection of poets under forty, *The American Poetry Anthology*. Here again, I think I must quote in full a poem called "For Rosa Yen, Who Lived Here:"

I

Mice in the garbage
mockingbirds in the attic
your iron
gasping over pockets and collars
you dream back into
the hollows of the night. . .

An ocean rocks
under the shadow of a gull

your father stands in the cold water
at dawn
his face and dark hair
tossing in a cloud
his bare feet sucked down
by sand

II

Those mornings
you never saw him leave
you'd slip down from the bed
while your mother slept,
move quietly across the room
and open the tall door
to your own world . . .

Light in the cat's eye
started you singing;
you followed your breath
around the house
and no one saw the schools
of bright fish swim through your fingers
no one saw you walking in and out
of yourself while the sun built a bridge of light
over Culiácan and Kowloon.

III

All night trucks droned
under the bridge at Highway City
dragging their dirty skirts of wind,
blackening the oleanders,
bruising the sleep of workers;
men like your father
who came to this valley and were robbed
and hidden like seeds,
men with too many border crossings
stamped in their faces
whose palms were worn smooth
on the slow fruits of their lives.

All night I sat still
and dreamed you; little girl,
woman, sister to the walls.
I spoke your name
as a charm against nothing
and waited . . .

IV

At the first touch of sun
mist rushes from the grass
and darkness goes back
to its nest of hair
swirling in a toilet
to its bottle of rainwater and dead laughter
lying in the weeds outside.

In this room filling with light
I'm alone as you were
with your beautiful man
nailed to the wall.

I would scream peacocks, break a window,
go back to sleep if I could

but this is California
where no one sleeps
California where your father
pointed a long finger
at the lizard and the dog
and this is the white shack
leaning into the orchard
where you lived Rosa.

If you pinned me down I would say that I have a few reservations about this poem, a few small questions about its movement, some of its images, here and there a slight over-insistence, usually through a verb. But on the whole it is a poem of extraordinary delicacy and sympathy, a poem to trust and cherish. It has some relation to the Wakoski poem in its way of meditating on questions of selfhood in that ambivalent California landscape, but aside from questions of the relative value of her self-preoccupation and his ability to move out in a fluid gesture of imaginative projection, what strikes me about his poem is the sensitivity to the possibilities of language. Each detail is placed carefully and has its evocative effect, partly as image, partly as a woven texture of movement, sound, and the energy released by imaginative juxtaposition. For example, those trucks, "dragging their dirty skirts of wind,/ blackening the oleanders,/ bruising the sleep of workers." The images themselves are stirring, but partly because of the way they echo other images and not least from a crafty marshalling of vowel and consonant. The same must be said of the passage in which "darkness goes back / to its nest of hair / swirling in a toilet / to its bottle of rainwater and dead laughter / lying in the weeds outside." A poet who thought the ef-

fectiveness of such a passage came entirely from its subject matter or through its images (in the sense of what the words refer to) would not be able to write that way, would ignore the other elements, the aspects of language itself as palpable, physical reality, at his or her peril. If you asked me whether Greg Pape has a future as a poet, I should certainly say yes.

Let me close with a few caveats and qualifications. Using a few examples, negative and positive, inevitably makes my comments sound more prescriptive than they are meant to be. I have not, for example, been arguing for the ornate rather than the plain style in poetry, for lush effects over spareness. I mentioned a reverence for Williams; when I read him as an undergraduate I sensed his deep care for language, but did not know how to listen to it or appreciate its distinctiveness. And I might well have cited other poets here — Jarrell, Stafford, Simic, Strand — whose varieties of a plainer style are quite as immediate and enchanting as Roethke and Charles Wright. The idea that language in poetry must constitute a separate, vivid, and transcendent reality is not narrow; its possibilities are multitudinous.

I think it should also be clear that if I am a fan of Stevens, if I enjoy John Ashbery, I am not an unyielding foe of discursive and even philosophical language in poetry. My main notion has simply been this: if you read a poet and begin to feel that his or her language excites and stirs you, that the text and the texture are somehow rightly married, that the pressure of the imagination on language is giving rise to a new and unique reality, then you do right to read on, trusting your intuitive response. If you find such elements lacking, then you do well to ask why, letting nobody tell you that it is important by reasons of content, good intentions, or reputation. Accept no substitutes!

Finally, let me point out it is merely chance that kept any women poets out of my positive examples. I was tempted to cite Sandra McPherson or Laura Jensen, but they have both appeared frequently in *FIELD*, and admiring their uses of language might have seemed like a roundabout way of citing my

editorial acumen. But I'll close with a short poem by Laura Jensen that appeared in our last issue, "The Cloud Parade:"

In deference to the cloud parade,
the horse has shed its winter red,
stamped its last horseshoe out of the shed,
has moved away, leaving no forwarding
address. The heavens turned furniture,
attics and beds, men with moustaches
heels over heads, they cover the sun
to a gloomy shade,
in deference to the cloud parade.

Scarves! Echoes! Pavillions!
The meat grain in bacon, the star-stun
in roast, the bone down the well, the moon
down the wane, the smoke from the fireplace,
beautifully made,
in deference to the cloud parade.

There, especially in the second stanza, is that miraculous quality that I have urged as the sign of true poetry. And what I have described as mastery is in fact a kind of happy servitude. Octavio Paz has said it: "Each time we are served by words, we mutilate them. But the poet is not served by words. He is their servant. In serving them, he returns them to the plenitude of their nature, makes them recover their being. Thanks to poetry, language reconquers its original state. First, its plastic and sonorous values, generally disdained by thought; next, the affective values; and, finally, the expressive ones." (*The Bow and the Lyre*)

DINO CAMPANA

After the sad tunes on the dog's tooth,
The twistwort and starbane
— Blood lilies the heart breeds —,
Your mouth is the blue door I walk through,
the lamp lit, the table laid.

INVISIBLE LANDSCAPE

This is the way it must have been in the first dusk:
Smokeclouds sculling into their slips in the Claw Mountains,
Bats jerked through the plumlight by strings of white sound;
The wind clicks through its turnstiles
Over the high country, the hush of a steady pulse . . .

I bring to this landscape a bare hand, these knuckles
Slick as a cake of soap,
The black snag of a tamarack,
The oddments and brown jewelry of early September evenings
In wet weather, a Colt-colored sky . . .

God is the sleight-of-hand in the fireweed, the lost
Moment that stopped to grieve and moved on . . .

BORN AGAIN

Sunday night and a full moon,
October the 19th, moon-glyphs on the grass and leaves.
In the endless expanse of heaven,
3 stars break out through the cover-up, and hang free.
Behind the veneer of light and the scorched lungs
Are walks I will take.

Nothingness, tilt your cup.
I am the wafer just placed on your tongue,
The transubstantiation of bone and regret
To air and a photograph;
I am the diamond and bad heart,
Breath's waste, the slip-back and failure of What's Past.

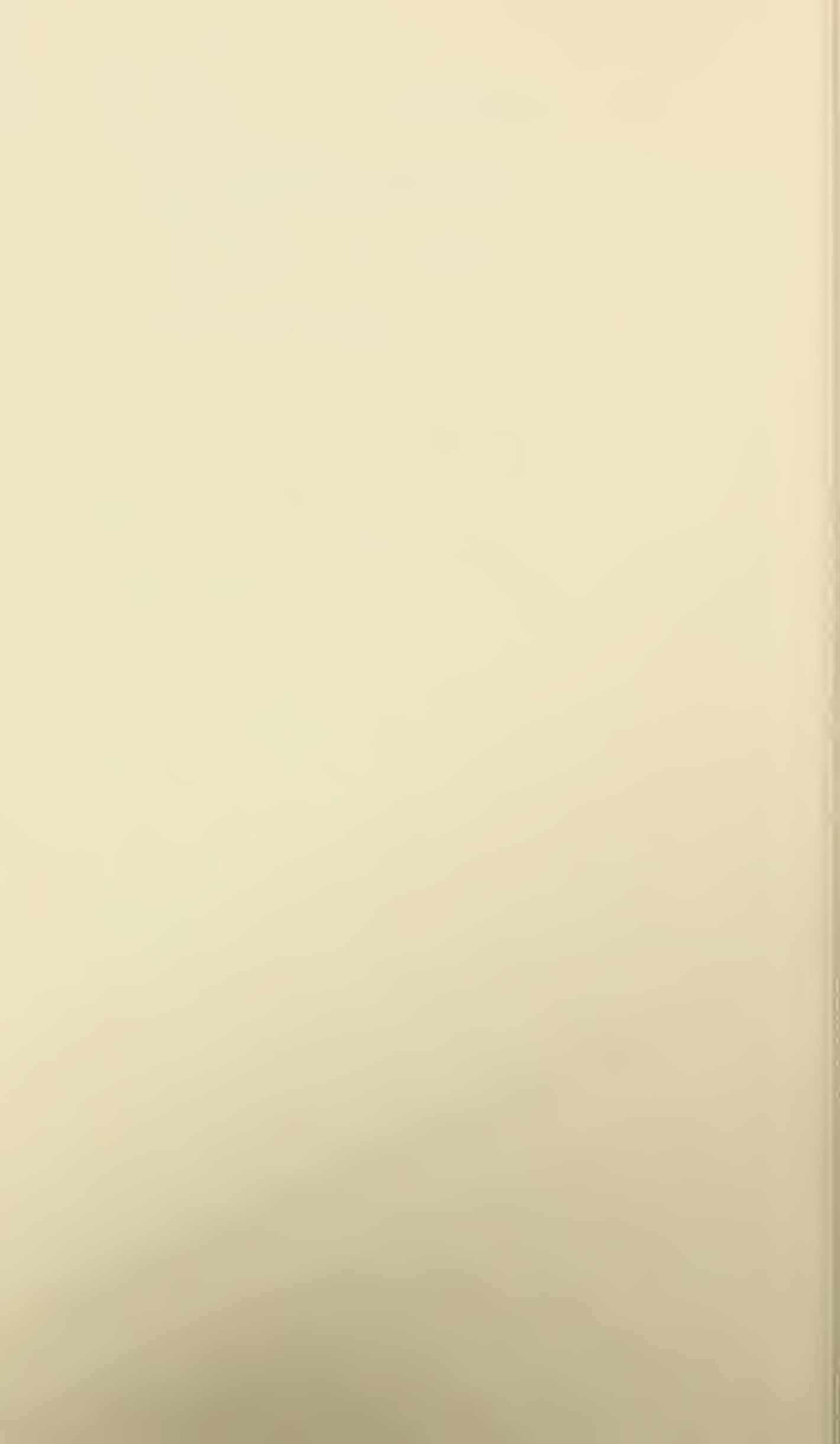
CAPTAIN DOG

Another December, another year
Gone to the bleached Pacific, a little castle of snow
Falling across the sky
I wanted to linger in for awhile.

And so I lose touch, the walls, in their iced dismemberings,
Shrinking like aches, a slide and a by-your-leave.

The nights, with their starred palms, press down,
Black moths on the screen door,
Slow breaths to stop the body's bleeding, deep breaths.

I'm jump-cut and Captain Dog, staked
In the shadow of nothing's hand.
I bend like a finger joint, I gather, I burn.



CONTRIBUTORS

DELMIRA AGUSTINI was born in Montevideo, Uruguay, in 1886, and lived there until 1914, when she was shot by her ex-husband. During her lifetime she published three books; "Unspeakable" comes from the second, **Cantos de la Manana**. She is considered an important figure in the Latin American modernist movement (whose 'founder' was Ruben Darío), and is the mentor of modern Latin American women poets. Her translator, MARTHA MOODY, is a student at Oberlin.

LEE BLESSING is presently a member of the Graduate Poetry and Playwriting Workshops at the University of Iowa.

NORMAN DUBIE will publish his third book of poems, **The Illustrations**, with George Braziller this September. He is currently Writer-in-Residence at Arizona State University.

Readers of FIELD need no introduction to GÜNTER EICH. The two poems translated here, from the 1966 volume, **Anlässe und Steingärten**, represent him at his most difficult, and most rewarding.

ALISON ENDER is presently studying at Sarah Lawrence College.

This is LINDA GREGERSON's second appearance in FIELD. She is currently at the Iowa Writer's Workshop.

This might almost be called our Iowa Workshop Issue. That's where BRENDA HILLMAN is too, finishing an MFA and holding a teaching-writing fellowship. She is a native of Arizona, and her poems have appeared in **kayak**, **Iowa Review**, and **Ohio Review**, among others.

RICHARD HUGO teaches creative writing and literature at the University of Montana. His most recent book is **What Thou Lovest Well, Remains American**.

Guess where MARK JARMAN is studying. His work has appeared in **American Review**, **Antaeus**, **kayak**, and **Poetry**. "My childhood," he writes, "was divided between a linoleum factory town in Scotland and a beach city in California. Iowa City is reminiscent of neither place. I hope you understand my predicament."

PHILIP LEVINE will publish his newest book, **The Names of the Lost**, this fall with Atheneum. Caedmon Records will release "The Poetry and Voice of Philip Levine" this March. Levine assures us that he does not sing on the record.

So far as we know, OSIP MANDELSTAM's "Cold Summer" has not been previously translated. It first appeared in the Soviet weekly *Ogonëk*, No. 16 (15 July, 1923), and has since been reprinted in the Russian edition of Mandelstam published in this country. The translator, EVE SHAPIRO, is a student at Oberlin.

GREGORY ORR is an assistant professor of English at the University of Virginia. His last book was *Gathering the Bones Together* (Harper and Row, 1975). He and his wife are living in a cottage about 25 miles south of Charlottesville.

BENJAMIN PÉRET has recently begun to gain recognition as one of the major poets of the French Surrealist movement. These poems are from the volume *De derrière les fagots*, published in 1934. The translator, KEITH HOLLAMAN, is at work on an anthology of Magical Realist fiction.

The Marien-Leben was one of RAINER MARIA RILKE's favorite works, finished at Duino in 1912. Some of these translations were read at Oberlin's Rilkefest, in honor of the poet's hundredth birthday in December, 1975.

FRANZ WRIGHT's chapbook, *Tapping the White Cane of Solitude*, has just appeared from the Triskelion Press.

PAMELA STEWART has published poems in *Poetry*, *Antaeus*, *The American Poetry Review*, and *The Iowa Review*. She lives in Tempe, Arizona with her husband and daughter.

JEAN VALENTINE lives in New York City and teaches poetry workshops at Sarah Lawrence College and at the 92nd St. YM-YWHA. Her most recent book of poems is *Ordinary Things*, published in 1975 by Noonday Press.

DAVID WALKER, formerly an editor of *FIELD*, continues to work toward a Ph.D. in English at Cornell. His essay in *FIELD* 13, "Stone Soup," drew many enthusiastic comments.

CHARLES WRIGHT is currently living in Laguna Beach, California. His last book was *Bloodlines* (Wesleyan, 1975). At present he is on leave from the University of California at Irvine, where he teaches.

DAVID YOUNG's essay was initially a lecture given at the University of Akron in January.

Kraków

Widok ogólny.

Рочтотука

29. 8. 1914

Мужу

Мне много благодарю

Ваша жена

Евгения Ивановна

